What is the Socio-Historical Method in the Study of Religion?

An Editorial By

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<u>Abstract</u>: *The purpose of this article is to answer what the socio-historical method is when applied to the study of religion, as well as detail how numerous disciplines (e.g. archaeology, anthropology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, theology, musicology, dramatology, etc.) contribute to its overall employment. In the broadest (and briefest) definition possible, a socio-historical study of religion coalesces the aims, philosophies, and methodologies of historiography with those of the social and cultural sciences, meaning it analyzes the interpretation and practice of religion through the lens of social/historical contexts, scientific discovery, and from within each faith tradition. The result is that the contexts surrounding a particular religion becomes the primary subject of study in order to better understand the origin, development, and expression of the religion itself. This article explains that the socio-historical study of religion is, in essence, an eclectic methodology that focuses on describing and analyzing the contexts from which the interpretation and practice of religion occurs. The goal is to examine how different aspects of a religion function in the broader socio-political and cultural milieu. Its most fundamental postulation is that the social history of a religious community affects how it interprets and practices their faith. By approaching religious inquiry from a socio-historical perspective, researchers are better able to recognize religion as a cultural and institutional element in ongoing social and historical interaction. Three sections will help to explain the socio-historical method: 1) a definitional dissection of the term "socio-historical"; 2) an elaboration of the principles inherent to the methodology; and 3) a case study example of the socio-historical method in practice.*

Introduction

THERE EXISTS NUMEROUS APPROACHES to the critical study of religion, particularly as they relate to exegetical methods, sociology, and history. For instance, in hermeneutics, researchers can utilize historical-grammatical methods, orality, source, form, and redaction criticism, tradition-historical criticism, ideological criticism, and social-scientific criticism (just to name a

few).[1] Literarily, there exists rhetorical, canonical, genre, reader-response, and narrative criticism, in addition to inner-biblical, intertextual, structural, and poststructural methods of interpretation.[2] However, even when discussing sacred texts, the study of religion most often transcends the exposition of Scripture to include more socio-historical fields of research that do not always involve interpretation, such as textual criticism, linguistics, cross-cultural comparisons, discourse analysis, performance criticism, and sound mapping.[3] This enlargement of religious research is the essence of a socio-historical methodology, which (particularly when not addressing sacred texts) involves sociology, psychology, historiography, and even philosophy, thereby distinguishing the socio-historical method from mere biblical or Qur'anic studies. The purpose of this article is to answer what, exactly, the socio-historical method is when applied to the study of religion, as well as detail how numerous disciplines (e.g. archeology, anthropology, theology, musicology, dramatology, etc.) contribute to its overall employment. The article explains that the socio-historical study of religion is, in essence, about the *circumstances* of religious expression; it is an eclectic methodology that focuses on describing and analyzing the social and historical *contexts* from which the interpretation and practice of religion occurs. Three sections will help to elucidate the socio-historical method: 1) a definitional dissection of the term "socio-historical"; 2) an elaboration of the principles inherent to the methodology; and 3) a case study example of the socio-historical method in practice.

Defining the Socio-Historical Method

In the broadest (and briefest) definition possible, a socio-historical study of religion coalesces the aims, philosophies, and methodologies of historical science with those of the social and cultural sciences, including anthropology, sociology, psychology, and (more generally) religious history.

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[1] For an overview of some of these hermeneutical methodologies, see Douglas Mangum and Amy Balogh, eds., *Social and Historical Approaches to the Bible*, vol. 3, Lexham Methods Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

[2] See Douglas Mangum and Douglas Estes, eds., *Literary Approaches to the Bible*, vol. 4, Lexham Methods Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

[3] Concerning the latter three, see Steven E. Runge, ed., *Discourse Studies and Biblical Interpretation: A Festschrift in Honor of Stephen H. Levinsohn*, Lexham Methods Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2011); David M. Rhoads, "Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 118–33; and Margaret E. Lee, ed., *Sound Matters: New Testament Studies in Sound Mapping*, vol. 16, Biblical Performance Criticism (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018).

The implication is that this methodology analyzes the interpretation and practice of religion through the lens of social/historical contexts, scientific discovery, and from within each faith tradition, making the contexts surrounding religion the primary subject of study. The goal of a socio-historical study is to examine how different aspects of a religion function in the broader socio-political and cultural milieu, regardless of whether the study focuses on ancient societies, medieval societies, or present-day societies.[4] The socio-historical method is in contrast to theology (which approaches religious studies from within a particular confessional dogmatism), as well as mere contextual studies (which seeks only to reconstruct the social history of a religious community but overlooks most other scientific data) and narrow comparative analyses (which simply contrast different texts, religious beliefs, and philosophies).

To begin, the prefix "socio-" has both a generalized and narrow meaning. With the former, it suggests the study of a society at large, including those elements known to affect religion, such as ethnicity, nationality, gender, economic stability, class identification, urban versus rural upbringing, political affiliation, educational achievement, income level, and access to health care. The prefix can be broadened to the discussion of agrarian societies, ancient West-Semitic societies, as well as patriarchal, collectivist, and pre-industrial societies. In its more nuanced form, "socio-" indicates the utilization of the *social* sciences (such as anthropology, sociology, and psychology) and the *humanities* (such as law, linguistics, literary criticism, and philosophy) in examining religious beliefs and practices.[5]

Of course, oftentimes the *natural* sciences (e.g. neuroscience, physiology, zoology, biology, chemistry, and physics) help to inform the social sciences and humanities, as well. Therefore, wherever relevant, the socio-historical method capitalizes on the insights of the natural sciences in its approach to religion, suggesting that each application depends on a researcher's philosophy of science, as well as the kinds and types of social theories in acceptance at the time of research. For example, speech-act theory in the philosophy of language and linguistics can help to inform religious specialists about the psychoacoustics involved in ancient prophetic discourse. That same model can then supplement the knowledge already gained from the study of economics and political science (to name only two) with regards to the

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[4] See Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 6th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 182–89.

[5] Cf. Jack David Eller, *Social Science and Historical Perspectives: Society, Science, and Ways of Knowing* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

marketplace of religious ideas and legislative policies. When combined, an historical Jesus researcher (for example) may have a greater understanding of some of Jesus' oral performances, particularly in relation to the rhetoric of competing religio-political institutions of the ancient Mediterranean world.[6]

Likewise, the suffix "-historical" indicates the methodology's use of historiography, as well as generalized knowledge about persons, places, institutions, and artifacts in a given era. The socio-historical method takes the insights of the social sciences and humanities and then adds numismatic or epigraphic discoveries (again, to name only two) in order to construct a more complete picture of a religion's social context. As such, the socio-historical method is not confined to any one period of time. Researchers and students can utilize the methodology for discussions on religion in any time period. Much like its social-scientific aspects, the socio-historical method will depend upon each researcher's particular philosophy of history.

It may seem that the term socio-*historical* is redundant, given that some may classify historiography as part of the social sciences (rather than the humanities), but the term hints at an important distinction by recognizing the evolutionary nature of religion across generational timelines. The rationale is that religions change from one generation to another. What was true of American evangelicalism in the mid-twentieth century may not be true of American evangelicalism in the 1980s or the first-half of the twenty-first century. Indeed, popular (or mainstream) expressions of American Christian beliefs altered dramatically between pre- and post-colonial periods just as they did between the pre- and post-antebellum or pre- and post-Civil Rights eras. Even individual religious leaders evolve, as was the case of Rev. Jerry Falwell, Sr. who once stridently defended racial segregation in the South only to reverse course once it was no longer politically expedient to do so.[7] Thus, the "-historical" suffix cautions researchers about generalizing the beliefs and practices of a religious community across large spans of time. It also demands that researchers consider particular religious identities predominantly from within a given timeframe in contrast to other epochs. This subtle difference,

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[6] Interestingly, it is this conglomeration of multiple disciplines that enables philosophers to use the socio-historical method even in the philosophy of religion. Though the philosophy of religion emphasizes analyzing and evaluating different belief systems, as a science it also helps construct and synthesize approaches to religious belief, as well.

[7] "The Nation's Best Bible College Gets Low Grades on Racial Diversity," *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 31 (Spring 2001): 43. See also, Susan Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000) and Dirk Smillie, *Falwell Inc.: Inside a Religious, Political, Educational, and Business Empire* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008).

then, helps establish a foundation for delineating the principles inherent to a socio-historical methodology.

Principles of a Socio-Historical Method

First, as expected, the primary principle inherent to the socio-historical method is an awareness and, ideally, avoidance of theological, traditional, or ideological allegiances when conducting research. In general, disciplines like theology ask normative questions about who and what to believe with the assumption that the theologian's specific deity (or deities) actually exists. Religious studies, on the other hand, asks descriptive questions about who and what different religious communities believe, especially about their different conceptions of deity, as well as what they claim different gods have done in the past. Engaging in a socio-historical study of religion seeks to account for the social and historical *circumstances* surrounding religious inquiry, as opposed to having church dogma (for example) influence the investigative results. Although, it is worth noting that disciplines like theology and Qur'anic studies invariably benefit from religious studies. For instance, Lester Grabbe utilizes cross-cultural parallels to examine the historicity and meaning of prophets and sages in ancient Israel. He concludes that cultic specialists held common functionary roles in the ancient Near East; consequently, the diviners and shamans of ancient Israel were no different from their pagan neighbors. Nonetheless, his socio-historical investigation concludes that much of the Hebrew Bible is historiographically problematic, a conclusion that may not have been possible had certain theological ideologies dictated his study.[8]

Second, the multi-disciplinary nature of the socio-historical method does not, therefore, require the adoption of any and all social-scientific fields or theories. While much can be learned from a cross-disciplinary approach to religion, there are limits to a researcher's expertise, space, and time. As such, the socio-historical method is able to provide innumerable insights about religious beliefs and practices, but specialists should not think of this method as the one and only (or even the best) approach to every religious inquiry, though it does have the potential for being the most comprehensive approach in many cases.[9] Indeed, perhaps due to a lack of extant texts or artifacts, sometimes

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[8] Lester L. Grabbe, *Priests, Prophets, Diviners, Sages: A Socio-Historical Study of Religious Specialists in Ancient Israel* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995).

[9] Cf. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Banton (1966; repr., New York: Routledge, 2004), 1–2.

sociological approaches to religion can be inappropriate, misguided, or (more commonly) incomplete without supplemental historical-descriptive elements.[10]

Third, the socio-historical method is deeply devoted to the background of a religious belief or practice. It seeks to understand and expose the contextual elements of religion, such as philosophical presuppositions, political maneuverings, or psychocultural anxiety, that give rise to different beliefs throughout human history. As Bart Ehrman explains,

> Investigators using the socio-historical approach to a text are interested in knowing how the historical experiences of an author and his or her social group (e.g., a family, a church, an army, a nation, or any other group of persons who are united together under some conditions) affected the presentation of the material. They focus on the relationship between a literary text and the social history of its author and his or her community.[11]

The same applies to dialogues in philosophy and apologetics. For example, philosophers of religion may address a theologian's latest apologetic defense for the resurrection of Jesus Christ in a socio-historical manner when they employ cross-disciplinary descriptive and analytic models to deconstruct an apologist's line of reasoning.[12] Indeed, the philosophical deconstruction is also subject to the very same social analysis as it employs on others.

Fourth, the socio-historical method is inherently constructive, analytic, and comparative in nature, though not necessarily all three simultaneously.[13] Constructively, the method utilizes first and secondhand descriptions of a group's biographical makeup or overall *Sitz im Leben* to infer sociological details about the group. Analytically, the method utilizes those same resources to infer

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[10] Philip J. Richter, "Recent Sociological Approaches to the Study of the New Testament," *Religion* 14, no. 1 (1984): 85. See also, Margaret Y. MacDonald, *The Pauline Churches: A Socio-Historical Study of Institutionalization in the Pauline and Deutero-Pauline Writings*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 60 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 23.

[11] Ehrman, *The New* Testament, 182.

[12] Cf. Robert Greg Cavin and Carlos A. Colombetti, "The Implausibility and Low Explanatory Power of the Resurrection Hypothesis—With a Rejoinder to Stephen T. Davis," *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 37–94, https://doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2020.vol2.no1.04.

[13] Gerd Theissen, "The Sociological Interpretation of Religious Traditions: Its Methodological Problems as Exemplified in Early Christianity," in *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays On Corinth*, ed. and trans. John H. Schütz (1982; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004), 175–200.

non-sociological elements about the group, such as community details within the *Sitz im Leben* that concern things like intergroup conflicts, organizational structure, and community norms. Comparatively, the method utilizes sources from outside the target group, which provides a more complete understanding of a religion's environmental and cultural context.

Fifth, the socio-historical method is not equivalent to the sociology of religion. Although it applies insights from statistical evaluations found in sociology, a socio-historical approach is not its own field of study or academic discipline. It is a research methodology that answers questions about religion or develops explanatory models derived from, in part, a particular focus on the social and historical circumstances surrounding religious belief and practice.[14] As such, the sociology of religion exists independently from the socio-historical method that often utilizes its findings.

Finally, the methodology inherently presumes that modern social-scientific models for studying religious groups, including the models of historiography, are applicable to religious groups throughout history. However, this principle is not to suggest that ancient and modern societies are precisely the same or even function similarly. Rather, the assumption is that societies can and do often act (and believe) in predictable ways. Most humans are socialized into accepting their culture's institutions and systems as normative.[15] Akin to the "principle of analogy," the basic belief is that what is true of modern human cognition and human behavior was likely true of humans in the past, as well. Nonetheless, researchers do need to use caution when superimposing modern language and concepts onto ancient minds. While modern frameworks can act as a guide to understanding earlier civilizations, researchers must still comprehend each religious group within their own distinct social and historical context. In this sense, it could be argued that this approach to the study of religion excels at helping people comprehend religious groups from within their own conceptual frameworks. Thus, the social sciences are great tools for examining religion, but these modern methods do not always provide absolute, concrete details about different cultures and time periods.[16]

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[14] Theissen, "The Sociological Interpretation of Religious Traditions," 175.

[15] Philip F. Esler, "Social-Scientific Approaches," in *Dictionary of Biblical Criticism and Interpretation*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (New York: Routledge, 2007), 337–40.

[16] Coleman Baker and Amy Balogh, "Social-Scientific Criticism," in *Social and Historical Approaches to the Bible*, ed. Douglas Mangum and Amy Balogh, Lexham Methods Series (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 3:197–98.

Apocalyptic Influences on Ancient Christianity:
An Example of the Socio-Historical Method

To illustrate the socio-historical method, this article will use the study of ancient apocalypticism as a brief but helpful illustration because of its multifaceted and complex nature. Not only does apocalypticism fall within the fields of theology, philosophy, and biblical studies, but researchers must also rely on sociological, anthropological, psychological, and historiographical data to make sense of apocalypticism's influence in the ancient world.[17] For instance, students of church history or the historical Jesus may ask what influence, if any, did Second Temple apocalypticism have on the primitive Christian church. While the book of Revelation is an obvious example of an apocalyptic influence on Christianity, it is not always immediately clear whether Jesus or the early church held the same apocalyptic worldview.[18] However, the language and imagery of the New Testament evidence strong similarities with apocalypticism. As John Collins remarks, "Both the Synoptic Gospels and the writings of Paul … are colored by an apocalyptic worldview to a significant degree."[19] Similarly, Greg Carey explains, "Apocalyptic topics and eschatological teachings represent a major emphasis of all four New Testament gospels."[20]

Indeed, as one example, a socio-historical comparison of cross-cultural parallels demonstrates that Jesus' proclamation of the immediacy of God's kingdom belongs to Second Temple apocalypticism. Nevertheless, this proclamation differed slightly from the anti-imperial imagery of cosmic catastrophe and revolution of Jewish apocalypticism by suggesting that the kingdom of God was currently overturning the present age.[21] Likewise, Jesus' repeated reference to the "Son of Man" is oftentimes an allusion to the Danielic designation in the apocalyptic book of Daniel. By associating himself

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[17] It should be noted that the author of this article specializes primarily in theological and church history; thus, the illustration presented here reflects a Christian-oriented field of study. Nonetheless, the socio-historical method is very much applicable to non-Christian and non-Western religious traditions, as well.

[18] For an in-depth discussion on Revelation as an apocalyptic book, see John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 269–78.

[19] Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 256.

[20] Greg Carey, *Ultimate Things: An Introduction to Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic Literature* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005), 102.

[21] Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987), 157–60. See also, Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 257–61.

with this heavenly figure, Jesus was likely declaring that he was the awaited eschatological deliverer who would eventually consummate the kingdom of God.[22] Moreover, the eschatological motifs and events surrounding the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus has a number of parallels in apocalyptic literature, causing many primitive Christians to expect an imminent and profound appearance of the kingdom of God.[23] However, the application of psychology (e.g. cognitive dissonance theory) and sociology (e.g. the marketplace of religious ideas) may indicate that when the awaited Parousia delayed, New Testament writers reinterpreted Christ's resurrection as the kingdom's inauguration, rather than its consummation, in order to explain why this delay was now their present reality.[24]

Conflicts with demons and Satan, in addition to the periodization of history, dualistic divisions between the righteous and the wicked, Jesus' authority over the sea, and depictions of hellfire, all correlate strongly to other apocalyptic images. Due to multiple episodes involving visionary experiences, heavenly scrolls, miracles, exorcisms, resurrections, and several counterparts to millenarian beliefs, several scholars conclude that Jesus viewed himself as an apocalyptic prophet.[25] Moreover, there are multiple references to extrabiblical Second Temple traditions throughout the New Testament, such as angels mediating the law of God on Mount Sinai (cf. Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:2) rather than having come directly from God himself (cf. Exod. 31:18; Deut. 9:10).[26] Peter Enns lists several other Second Temple references:

> For example: Jannes and Jambres as the names of Pharaoh's magicians (2 Tim 3:8); the reference to the quarrel between Satan and Michael over Moses' body (Jude 9); Noah as a "preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5);

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[22] See Adela Yarbro Collins, "The Origin of the Designation of Jesus as 'Son of Man,'" *Harvard Theological Review* 80, no. 4 (1987): 391–407; Frederick J. Murphy, *Apocalypticism in the Bible and Its World: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 237–39; Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 261–63.

[23] Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (1999; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 227–38; Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 40–41, 136–41.

[24] Cf. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 264–68.

[25] See Dale C. Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), esp. 61–64; Murphy, *Apocalypticism in the Bible and Its World*, 285–304; and Carey, *Ultimate Things*, 102–24.

[26] Peter Enns, "Fuller Meaning, Single Goal: A Christotelic Approach to the New Testament Use of the Old in Its First-Century Interpretive Environment," in *Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. Kenneth Berding and Jonathan Lunde (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 185–97.

the specific reference to Enoch in Jude 14–15; the reference to Moses' Egyptian education (Acts 7:22); a mobile source of water during the Israelites' wilderness wanderings (1 Cor 10:4).[27]

The type of socio-historical method being employed is one that emphasizes the influence of Second Temple literature on the primitive church's own self-identity. Because of this contextual study, some scholars can claim that Jesus himself adhered to apocalypticism.[28] Hence, Shaye Cohen compares the nascent Christians to the apocalyptic Essenes, where both had such a strong eschatological fervor that they developed a dualistic view of the cosmos in expectation of the temple's destruction.[29] As Ernst Käsemann pointedly states, "Apocalyptic is the real beginning of primitive Christian theology."[30]

Nevertheless, it is important for interpreters to recognize the tension with apocalyptic expectations, as well. Charles Holman explains that the early church had a dialectical tension between Christ's imminent return and the delay of his Parousia. The most significant departure was Christianity's placement of a messianic figure at the center of its eschatology, whereas most apocalyptic writings did not portray a messiah at all. Highlighting psychology and imperial tensions in the socio-historical method, Holman argues that Christianity developed in a milieu that already had to cope with God's delay, suggesting that apocalyptic cries for deity to intervene appeared repeatedly throughout apocalyptic literature. While the delay in the Parousia caused anxiety for the primitive church, it also caused problems for Second Temple Judaism, as well. As such, apocalyptic themes allowed the church to express its eschatological expectations while maintaining a tension about Christ's return. For Holman, Christianity progressively emphasized the delayed Parousia and eventually viewed it positively as an opportunity for proselytization.[31]

By recognizing apocalyptic language as a vehicle for communicating social and religious anxiety, researchers are able to view the primitive church as both a product and a self-conscious reinterpretation of Jewish apocalyptic expectations. Hence, it is not necessary for Christians today to believe the ancient church fully adopted the same religious views as other apocalyptic

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[27] Enns, "Fuller Meaning, Single Goal," 196.

[28] See for example, Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 256–79.

[29] Shaye J. D. Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 165.

[30] Ernst Käsemann, "The Beginnings of Christian Theology," *Journal for Theology and the Church* 6 (1969): 40.

[31] Charles L. Holman, *Till Jesus Comes: Origins of Christian Apocalyptic Expectation* (Hendrickson Publishers: Peabody, MA, 1996), chaps. 8–11; see esp. 98, 136–37, 157–58.

movements. However, a socio-historical study of the context makes it apparent that Christianity held the same beliefs as Second-Temple apocalyptic Judaism, such as belief in supernatural revelation, a spiritual dimension with angels and demons, and an eschatological judgement that would eventually culminate in a general resurrection and paradisal establishment of God's kingdom on earth. Early Christianity was part of the same cognitive environment as Second Temple Judaism and shared the same conceptual framework about reality as apocalypticism, though there may be varying degrees of affinity to different apocalyptic eschatologies.[32] As Murphy summarizes,

> Christianity began as an apocalyptic sect within Judaism. When the temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, Judaism redefined itself with the Torah at its core, and apocalyptic beliefs became less important for Jews. Christianity's identity was tied up with apocalypticism, so as it emerged as a religion separate from Judaism, it preserved its apocalyptic foundations and has done so to the present day.[33]

What the socio-historical method does, in the words of Mark Wallace, is offer "iconoclastic devices for smashing the idols of belief naively unaware of its origins in certain systemic distortions—be those distortions economic, philosophical, or psychodynamic."[34] In so doing, this methodology exposes the profoundly human dimensions of religious belief and devotion at each stage of development and expression.

Conclusion

The above case study provides only a brief example of how the socio-historical method can elucidate the origins and contexts behind different religious beliefs and practices. By definition, the socio-historical method seeks to comprehend religious texts, beliefs, and practices according to the social world and historical circumstances of the religion in a given time period. Its most fundamental postulation is that the social history of a religious community affects how they interpret and practice their faith. By approaching religious inquiry from a socio-historical perspective, as demonstrated in the

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[32] Cf. Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*, 12–14.

[33] Murphy, *Apocalypticism in the Bible and Its World*, 4.

[34] Mark I. Wallace, "Introduction," in Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 7.

case study, researchers are better able to recognize religion as a cultural and institutional element in ongoing social and historical interaction.[35] At its core, the socio-historical method brings together multiple relevant fields of study, both secular and religious, by adapting the insights of those disciplines for use in the study of religion. As a paradigmatic methodology, its eclecticism is then employed to inform other subdisciplines within religious studies, such as the philosophy, sociology, and psychology of religion. The term "socio-historical" itself suggests a compilation of diverse methods, particularly historical-descriptive, theoretical, and social-analytic forms of inquiry.[36] As such, the historical, social-scientific, and cultural-analytic elements work symbiotically together, correcting and regulating the findings of each discipline to produce a more refined and contextually-based study of religion than mere theological or basic comparative methods could produce on their own.[37]

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[35] Theissen, "The Sociological Interpretation of Religious Traditions," 177.

[36] Cf. MacDonald, *The Pauline Churches*, 19–28.

[37] For a detailed analysis of the socio-historical method, see also Anthony J. Blasi, Paul-André Turcotte, and Jean Duhaime, eds., *Handbook of Early Christianity: Social Science Approaches* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2002).
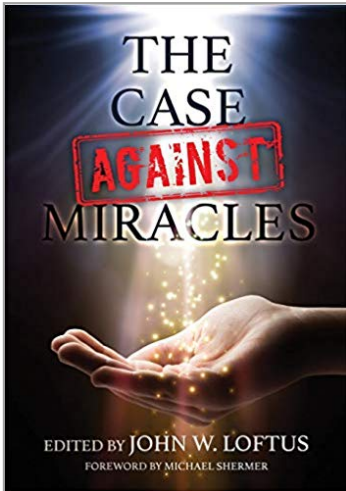
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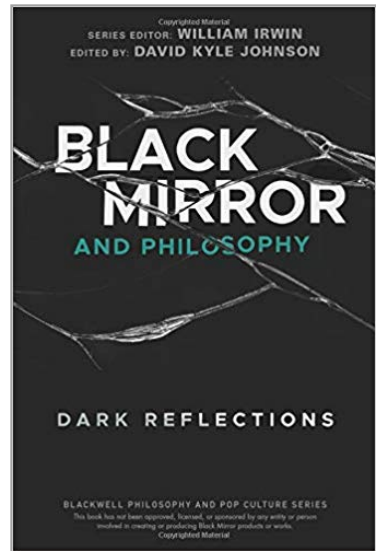
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